



FLAME OF THE BORDER

By VINGIE E. ROE....

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W.N.V. SERVICE

THE STORY

CHAPTER I.—Seeking death by throwing herself from the summit of Lone Mesa, to escape dishonor, at the hands of a drunken desperado, Sonya Savarin allows herself to be rescued by her suddenly sobered and repentant attacker. The girl is a self-appointed physician to the Navajo Indians, living on an Arizona sheep ranch with her brother Serge, his wife, Lila, and their small daughter, Baba. For a year she has been engaged to Rodney Blake, wealthy New Yorker, but her heart is with the friendless Navajos and she evades a wedding.

CHAPTER II.—Sonya pulls Little Moon, wife of Two Fingers, a Navajo, through the crisis of an illness. Two Fingers is deeply grateful.

CHAPTER III.—In the desert village, shopping, Sonya again meets the man whose advances she had repulsed on Lone Mesa. He tells her he bitterly regrets his action and has never had a minute's peace since that day. Sonya is affected, but unforgiving. She hears rumors of a Border bandit "El Capitan Diablo," who crucifies his "double-crossers" and has a dire reputation as a despoiler and murderer, vaguely connecting him with her attacker.

They put him up and fed his burro, and listened quietly, these dark, hard-riding men of cattle camp and sheep camp, while he told them of their sins and the Hope of the World that never died. How much of it went in he never knew, since they are a silent lot, but it was not his job to know. That was to give the Word, that only.

So now Sonya watched him, smiling a little in gentle sympathy, and recalled the stories of his goodness and his unbounded courage which she had heard. A strange little old man, filled with undying zeal, his spirit a flame of evangel, like those amazing padres who had walked the West in an earlier day, he commanded the respect of all who came in contact with him—the gentle, mad old Servant of the Lord.

The sun went down entirely, and the vast spread of the sandy levels clothed themselves in royal purple beyond a painter's dreams. The world was a lovely place, the Servant said in his soft old voice, fit footstool for the feet of God. There was no evil in it of itself. Only man made evil. Man, with his greed and his cruelty.

Beezebub was abroad in the land—Beezebub and his henchman. He had seen them with his own eyes, he the Servant of the Lord in humble places. They traveled together by night, and danger waited on them, death and danger and disaster. It had struck just across the Border in that stark form hung upon a cross. It was no common thief who rotted there in the windy sun, but one who had betrayed his master. Beezebub himself, that master, dark and cold and wicked as infernal fire. He was a power and a force not to be reckoned with or questioned. Though several hundred miles lay between the Border and this sheltered spot, still the finger of the Wicked One could reach even here. The old man had seen shadows. Many shadows. Chief of them the Master's blue-eyed henchman. No good stayed where the Blue-eyed One went by. He had heard of him across the line last year, the tall one with bronze-colored hair who was always seen when disaster was to follow. A sign and a symbol of disaster, this tall one with the wild eyes. And he had seen him three days back riding down the trail to Red Rock canyon on a horse of solid gold. So did the Wicked One mount his followers.

Well, it was growing late, and he was tired. The old were always tired. So he would find his

blankets and sleep, if his friends permitted.

He rose and bowed with a lean grace, vague remnant of some forgotten time, and went away toward the camp he had made with his packs and his weary burros, and Sonya Savarin sat still in every atom of her body with a strange stillness. It seemed as if a hushing hand had been laid upon her spirit, something cold and sinister came down upon her like a cloud. Evil seemed to fall with the night

and the old man's words, and presently she shivered and wrapped her arms across each other as if to shut it out. Then she shook herself and listened to Myra, who was saying how mad the Servant was. A strange old creature. Gentle and kind and quite, quite mad, so Myra thought.

But Sonya thought he was somehow akin to her in this quixotic crusade against suffering. Only he had added sin as well.

And he seemed to have a vision. It was this prophetic vision, fitting so closely with her own sense of disaster concerning certain things, which seemed to fall upon her with so chill a touch.

Piffle! She was getting old herself! It was the night and the silence of the vast country under its great stars. What were rumors of a Border bandit to her? A dark renegade who crucified his double-crossers! Nothing. She would forget the chill it gave her. She'd be all right by day.

And so she was, visiting with Myra, laughing and happy, watching the Servant ride away, his saddlebags bulging with Myra Little's generous gifts of food.

She stayed two days at the Black Sheep and left early on the third, much to Myra's dissatisfaction, who held her hand as she leaned from Darkness' saddle and talked till the last minute.

CHAPTER IV

The Spots of the Leopard.

AT THE home ranch Sonya found two air-mail letters from Rodney Blake which completed her entire return to the commonplace. She smiled as she read them, and for the first time it seemed as if there might be a charm or two in the great city he depicted so colorfully.

She rode over to Chee wash to see Two Fingers and Little Moon the next day and found the Indian woman up, and about the simple matters of her hogan, her rug, and her family.

It gave the girl a thrill to see her so, the flush of joy that such vindication of her work always brought. She was poor as the goods of this world went, they were all fairly so, Serge and Lila and Little Baba, but she felt very rich inside her, arrogantly rich, and she could smile up at the blue heavens with a secret sense of fellowship.

So she left her last instructions with the little family at the hogan, patted the cheek of the youngest round-eyed child, and rode away erect in her saddle and pretty well satisfied with herself and the world at large.

It was in this mood that she came under the tall face of Lone Mesa.

As she swung round its southeastern side, she decided to go up. The trail, cut into the sheer face by those long dead inhabitants of the pueblo, went up from here, angling sharply, and so steep that none but

the level-headed dared to make it. She was such, and so was the good horse under her, though they had both sweated in a cool day the first time they had attempted it.

It was a stiff and slow climb, but presently they gained the top and scrambled up through the small defile that was the steep trail's end.

As they went forward Sonya felt the surge and thrill she always felt at sight of the vast reach of the world about her, spread out so far below. Taking off her hat, she sat long in contemplation, her hands and the hat resting on her pommel.

For a long time she sat so, then reined away toward the right. She would circle the mesa, look at the silent white houses with their flat roofs, still amazingly intact, look at the great stone basin which was nearly always sweet with water caught in the yearly rains.

Presently she left the ancient tank and went on toward the north,



Presently She Left the Ancient Tank and Went On Toward the North.

circling the huddled houses, and was turning eastward round them when she stopped dead still.

A horse stood there in the blue shadow of the silent walls and a man sat on his haunches smoking a cigarette. The horse was golden as a raw ingot, and the man was bronzed and lean. The light of his bare head shone in the cool shade. He looked up, and Sonya looked down, and the girl's eyes dilated with swift excitement.

"So!" she said coldly, her lips suddenly tight. "You come here again?"

The man arose, a single motion beautifully correlated.

Sonya, not conscious of what she was doing, sat looking at him, and presently he looked up at her, a straight look, humble and still.

"I—like the mesa," he said. "It's so high and austere, so far from— from everything."

At the contact of his glance the strange tense feeling which this man's presence had caused at every meeting took hold on Sonya. It was not fear—it had never been—nor repugnance, nor the anger which had stirred her, but a little of all shot through with something which she could not define, a sense of prophecy, a forecast of destiny.

It chilled her within and sent a wave of fire across the chill, and for a wild moment she felt as if the solid rock were falling away beneath her. Then she caught herself together severely and lifted Darkness' rein, and the man spoke again.

"Please," he said, "please, Miss Savarin, don't go away. I'll go right gladly."

He reached for the bridle of the golden horse and drew it to him, hesitating.

"I know I've got no right even to speak to you," he said, "or look at you after—that day up here, but if I was to be hung for it next second I couldn't help it. And I don't want to cause you another minute's trouble or unhappiness. If this here mesa's a favorite place of yours, I'll never come again. Don't stay away yourself. It's too sweet to be lost."

"But you'd lose it," Sonya said against her will.

"I'd lose my right hand if it would

help," he said doggedly, looking down and fiddling with his latigo. "I'm," said the girl through her nostrils, a sharp and cynical sound. "I would," he repeated, "an' all you've got to do is set a mark to prove it. Is there anything—any single thing that a man can do to prove his word? Tell me, and I'll do it."

"Who is the bandit across the Border who crucifies his double-crossers?" cried Sonya like a shot and gasped at the sound of her own words. It seemed as if another person spoke them, so wholly unintentional had they been.

The man's eyes flashed up to hers, and once again they were wild as any hawk's, the black of the pupils spreading over the blue of the irises. Slowly the color drained from his face, leaving it ash white beneath its bronze, the lips pale as blue milk.

"Good G—d!" he said and was silent.

The girl was silent, too, and for the first time she felt a flash of fear, as if she had set in motion sinister forces of which she knew nothing. They stared at each other for a moment aghast at this thing which had sprung between them, stark and terrible, and then Sonya flicked her rein, moved in her saddle recovering. She knew she had touched disaster too deep for a woman's hand, and she drew back instinctively.

"No," she said swiftly, "don't answer, I shouldn't have asked. And it's no proof, anyway. I don't want proof. What's past is past. I take your word."

The man wet his stiff lips.

"You do? Do you believe what I've been trying to tell you ever since that day: that I could kill myself for what I did? Do you believe me?"

"Yes," said Sonya. "Not that it matters, but I do."

He took out a white handkerchief and wiped his face, which was sweating in the high cool wind.

"No," he said unsteadily, "not that it matters—to you. But it does to me. Why, I don't know, but it does. More than anything has ever mattered in my whole d—d life—I beg your pardon?"

"Granted," said the girl. "Serge swears."

"Serge?"

"My brother."

"Well, it matters, and I've spent hours alone up here and other places wondering about it and why it does. I've known women all my life, in several countries, and never a one that stayed in my mind a week after I left her. I'm a bad lot, as I told you before, and I don't mean a great deal what I think, one way or another, only I ain't ever felt so sorry in all my days over anything. I was just wondering, when you rode around th' wall yonder."

Sonya regarded him steadily.

"It does matter," she said, "what anyone thinks and does. No man lives to himself alone, as the Good Book says. To every man his place and a certain amount of influence. And to every man his responsibility, too, for that influence. You've got influence, somewhere for something."

"And something's changing in you," the girl went on, "there's been a change in you since—since the first time I saw you. In your face, in your speech. You're using more 'g's on the end of your words, for one thing, and your eyes are different."

"If they weren't when I look at you, I'd be lower than I am, and that's plenty low."

"Granted again," said Sonya calmly and watched the slow tide of red that swept up over his pale cheeks. "But the very fact of change outwardly argues change inwardly. I'd trust you now a considerable way."

He drew a long breath of fragrant smoke and, turning away, looked out over the spread of desert shimmering under the early afternoon sun.

When he turned back to her Sonya was shocked at the look on his handsome face, a sunken look, haggard, as if some cruel vise of the spirit had suddenly been set upon it. He smiled, for the first time in her experience of him, and something leaped in Sonya's heart like a captive bird struggling to be free.

"Miss Savarin," he said, "that's the sweetest and the cruellest thing

you ever said in your life. It's a dangerous thing, too—for me. I'm glad you said it. It'll be something—something to remember. I'll be getting along. And here whenever you want, Lone Mesa is yours from now on."

He swung into his saddle, and the girl put out a quick hand and caught his sleeve.

"No," she said swiftly, "why should you give it up? There's some thing here for you, something good, I know. It's your eyes when you look out yonder, a peace and a healing, and I want you to have that. You need it. It—it's something of the—of the soul, if you see what I mean."

Gravely he looked at her, shook his head wonderingly.

"My G—d!" he said softly. "What a woman you are! I didn't know there was one like you outside of th' story books! Are you, by any chance, a lady preacher?"

"No," said Sonya, "of course not. I'm a physician. But I'm a woman first, and I can see when a heart's sick as well as a body. You're sick in your soul, your character, w' I miss my guess—and I usually don't do that."

"No," he said, "you haven't seen. But it don't matter in this one. It's too late for medicine—your's."

"It's not," said Sonya, and was astonished at the passion of her tone; "it's never too late. Not one's last heartbeat—only then."

"What are you trying to do?" he asked her gently, smiling into his eyes again—"change th' spots of a leopard? Be careful. There's a more treacherous beast alive. I'm telling you true, Miss Savarin. I'm a leopard at heart, cruel and fierce, and not fit for you to need to like this, straight out, as a man. I don't deserve it. If you knew what an' who I am you'd turn your horse an' ride for that desert trail like all possessed, an' you'd be right."

"Maybe I do know—a little," Sonya flashed, "but I'm not afraid. I'm never afraid of anything."

"No. You're like a white angel in armor," he said gravely; "you haven't any need to fear. But I could not hurt you when I want to. You're safe—anywhere—any time. Th' devil himself couldn't hurt you."

"Will you remember what I say—that it's never too late to change?"

"I'll remember," he said solemnly. "An' thanks. Now, goodby, an' good luck always, Miss Savarin."

"Good-by," said Sonya, "and the same to you."

He carried his hat in his hand as he whirled the horse around the corner of the ancient stone house and did not look back, and Sonya listened to the shed doors swing into the defile that led down to face of the sheer cliff.

She sat stiffly quiet in her saddle and was conscious of a strange tumult within her spirit. What had she done, talking here in this high solitude with this mysterious man whose inner self was black with unnamed sins—whose very presence in the land was a menace and a portent of disaster? For she had past all doubting that this was the Blue-eyed One of whom the desert spoke in his vague parables, the henchman of Beezebub who rode before trouble. And she who had hated him, who had vowed to take her pound of flesh from him because of what he had tried to do that day "at the mesa's rim! She had talked with him, earnestly, and without scorn!

The next day she went to see Little Moon and refused the bundle of sheep pelts which Two Fingers offered her, along with the gorgeous finished blanket which the woman laid across her knees.

Sonya stroked the latter with appreciative fingers, but shook her head, smiling.

"What I did for you," she said them in Navajo, "was a giving—service to my people. You are of my people. I have chosen the Navajo before the Great Spirit. Let be. It is well."

After a long silence Two Fingers said, "It is well. And we are of the Navajos around here are just a little people, under your feet. A soft blanket to keep your heels from the stones."

(Continued next week.)